



Building a Future of High Performance

To thrive over the long term, organisations must have the right capabilities and structures in place to enable great decision making. Leaders in the public sector discuss how they have done this, with **Dylan Totton**

The UK's public sector is embarking on a period of transformation not seen for a generation. This challenge will require great leaders who can reimagine the future and then make this a reality with the help of the right structures, people and long-term thinking.

At Criticaleye's inaugural [Public Sector Summit](#), held in association with [Capita](#), the discussion explored how organisations can be reshaped to deliver high performance and what leadership capabilities will be needed.

Andy Start, CEO of Capita Public Service, kicked the event off with an inspiring overview of what the future of the public sector could look like. "We've got to think about what happens if we get radical, agile and seize the collaboration

that we've learned [to do] over the last couple of years, really leveraging the leadership and passion of our people to make a difference," he said.

Andy explained how partnerships will be essential for delivering the highest levels of service. "If we think forward 10 years to what it would look like if we embraced that, we'll have moved away from a transactional model of government to a much more relational partnership between local government, devolved government and central government, [and] with businesses, the third sector and citizens as participants.

"We'll have had a real shift to trying to solve the end-to-end problem, rather than trying to solve the problem within our stovepipes or areas of responsibility.

That's a massive mindset shift that we need to accelerate," he said.

Defining Great Leadership

High performance in this public sector of the future will need great leadership. **Sir John Manzoni**, now Chair of SSE, set out what this means to him. "Leaders should do two things," he said. "They should set the context in a way that is empowering and useful and they should develop everybody else."

When it came to developing people, experience was the biggest thing **Sir John** judged was lacking in the workforce when he took on his former role of Chief Executive at the Civil Service in October 2014. "You can't do policy without intellect, but you can't >



do delivery without experience, and those two things are so fundamentally different,” he explained. “I was trying to figure out what it would take to provide the civil servants with the experience that I felt was missing, and what happens when you don’t have experience is you replace it with process.”

Sir John said there are no shortcuts to gaining experience. “Those of us who have made some horrendous mistakes in our lives have learned the most from when we made those mistakes, and they’re usually [made] somewhere on the frontline,” he said.

The challenge he faced at the Civil Service called for structural change. “I introduced a set of functional structures [... and] hired a series of functional leaders. It started to break down some of the silos,” he said.

This also created career paths for people. “You can give a young person massive experience in a very short period of time if you have the structure,” **Sir John** said. “As a result, there are graduates, senior hires and medium hires all going into the Civil Service now who are eager to help the policy experts solve particular problems.”

A Structure for Decision Making

When it comes to **Sir John’s** other marker of good leadership – setting out the context in a way that is empowering – you also need the right set up at the top.

Air Marshal Susan Gray, Director General of the Defence Safety Authority at the Royal Air Force, faced up to a structural challenge with her team. “I had 15 people on my Management Board, which was too many. We never made decisions because there [was] too much talking going on, and it’s not that the talking

“What happens when you don’t have experience is you replace it with process”

wasn’t important, it was at too low a level to be [at] an Executive Board,” she said.

She took a fresh look at who needed to be overseeing strategic planning and thinned this down to her leadership team and non-executive directors. She then held separate meetings for the other leaders.

“I introduced a Command Group [and] brought them in on a fortnightly basis to talk collectively about the scientific issues, the challenging horizon-scanning issues, accidents and incidents. [This meant] they were all informed, understood what different parts of my organisation were doing and, therefore, we’re able to help each other. So, I still had that connection, and they didn’t feel disenfranchised,” she said.

This change allowed her people to perform. “It’s giving people the freedom to get on and do their job and take away extraneous activity, whether it’s worrying about budgets, recruiting or what our business plan is going to look like. They all have a say in it, but they don’t need to do the work in terms of monthly meetings,” **Susan** said.

During the pandemic, even with the right structures in place, many leadership teams have struggled to balance long-term policy making with operational delivery. Getting this right will be crucial

as we move forward. **Matthew Blagg**, CEO of Criticleye, explained: “The past two years have taken uncertainty to the next level, and people have had to react quickly and make decisions at pace. When you are facing so much change, there is the risk that leaders will take their eyes off the longer perspective.”

Leadership teams must now take stock. “In our latest [research](#), 77 percent of CEOs said they need to spend more time on long-term planning. It’s a balance that every organisation has to strike,” **Matthew** said.

To deliver high-performance into the future, leaders must get the right structures and people in place. They should build on the agility that the pandemic has required while setting out the longer-term picture for their organisation. ■

Criticleye’s [Public Sector Forum](#) will take place on Wednesday 30th November 2022.

If you are interested in attending this event, please contact your Relationship Manager or the [Events](#) team.

Featuring Commentary From:



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